

A CONTEMPLATIVE EXPLORATION OF IDENTITY AND PURPOSE

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HUMAN QUESTIONS

Who am I? What is my work? Who are we? What is our work? These questions have always engaged contemplative men and women from time immemorial. It is no different for us in the Twenty First Century, in this so called information age of post-modernity. Why have these questions always gnawed at us, arising seemingly from the very depths of our beings? From where do they come, and to where will they lead? These are the perennial questions of identity and purpose that have always emerged out of the human quest for understanding and for meaning.

We have all asked these questions at one time or another. Often they arise in times of crisis or uncertainty, in times of trouble or suffering, when we ask: why is this happening? What should I/we do? But they also arise, at times most naturally, throughout the process of human growth and development. At birth, infancy, puberty, adolescence, young adulthood, adulthood, middle age, old age, death – at all of these times of natural passage, existential questions about our identity and purpose arise quite spontaneously. They arise when we have to choose careers, change careers and lose careers; they arise when we have to marry and when we have to divorce. They arise in the midst of all relationships whenever we have to choose and to decide; should I/we do this or that? And they press upon us so poignantly in the often bewildering human process of spiritual growth and development; which is inextricably intertwined with the total growth and development of the human. As Irenaeus of Lyons has so aptly explained, in a totally incarnational understanding of the human: “The glory of God is the human fully alive.” To be human is to be both spirit and flesh, one living being.

To be human, is to be a question. Who am I? What is my work? These two, and the two that follow: Who are we? What is our work? are among the most fundamental that we will ever ask. Why is this so? Maybe because to be human, is to be both mystery and enigma. But, more likely it is because we have the capacity to think and to reflect, and in particular to self-reflect. And, in this reflection, to be impelled to discover (or uncover) the truth of self – who we are and what is our purpose. Inevitably, experience shows that this exploration takes us into the realm of the Transcendent, which is in reality the realm of the Religious.

HOMO RELIGIOSUS

“Religion¹ is not something tacked on to the human condition, an optional extra ... The desire to cultivate a sense of the transcendent may be the defining (human) characteristic.” (Karen Armstrong – The Case for God)

The ancients, our wise ancestors, were truly religious. Their quest for meaning and understanding led them to reflect and to observe that humans, unlike all other living creatures, stood habitually and purposively erect and upright on two legs. They wondered why. They contemplated this deeply. For them, in the world as they understood and experienced it, humans were a bridge. They and they alone stood vertically on an otherwise flat earth. Standing feet on the earth and heads in the heavens revealed something about identity and purpose. Humans formed a ‘bridge’ between heaven (above) and earth (below)! And this was no

¹ There is some academic disagreement as to the exact etymology of the word ‘religion’, but there is sufficient consensus to suggest the following. It is likely derived from either the Latin ‘*religare*’ or ‘*relegere*’ (though I see no reason why not from both). The former leads to the understanding as *re* (again) + *ligare* (tie, bind, connect); hence, *re-ligare* as meaning ‘to tie’, ‘to bind’ and ‘to reconnect’ – which of course begs the question: tie, bind, reconnect to and with what/who? The latter is construed as *re* (again) + *legere* (read); hence *re-legere* as meaning to read again, to go over again, to consider again carefully, to contemplate - which also prompts one to ask: to read, go over, consider carefully, contemplate what? And both of these musings compel one to also ask, why? Why should we ‘reconnect’ and ‘contemplate’? To what end? For what purpose?

small matter. With this identity came great purpose; and with purpose, responsibility – a sacred responsibility.

Identity and purpose were linked, as they have always been and will always be. Identity 'in-forms' purpose and the enactment of purpose shapes identity; in an unending, unfolding process of spiraling growth and development. For our ancestors, humans were somehow 'linked' and 'connected' to heaven; and had the awesome responsibility of balancing the forces of heaven and earth; because they stood upright upon the earth. This responsibility was discharged by connecting and reconnecting throughout life with the Transcendent Heavens, being open to receive the revelations of how to live in the world, contemplating these deeply, living accordingly, and then returning always with the questions of living to this 'cycle of being'. In a dangerous and unpredictable world, to separate one-self and ones community from this cycle was to perish! Shamans, sorcerers, oracles, priests and priestesses were valued and esteemed, precisely because they lived in and had access to this 'cycle of being'.

These ancient ancestors, so called primitive men and women, also discovered that by blowing in a certain way into a piece of hollow reed or a dried fruit shell or a dead hollow bone, would produce sounds. These sounds were considered 'magical' and 'life giving'; and our ancestors used these 'instruments' and this 'life giving' process to cure disease, protect themselves and communicate and connect with spirits. For them breath was life; and could also be life giving. To 'drone' and 'chant', to produce sound; this for them was not mere entertainment; but rather a sacred process that connected them to the Source of Life.

Spirit was breath; and breath was Spirit; and through the repetitive use of their breath and the sounds it could create, they could somehow touch this 'spirit-hidden-in-breath' that gave them life. They understood and believed that to be a bridge they had to connect with Spirit; and that they could do so through the repetitive use of breath and sound. Surely they were religious – Homo Religiosus.

ADAM

Who is *adam*? This is a most fitting question for us today, we who claim to be sons and daughters of *adam*! And so, let us begin our exploration of identity and purpose by contemplating *adam*. Our journey will take us far and wide, and I hope we will find it interesting and informative, but most of all transforming. So let us begin. Who is *adam*?

Not 'I' or 'Me'; but 'Us' and 'We'

The Biblical text begins with Genesis, and the first accounts in Genesis are about creation. Indeed, the creation accounts reach their high point with God's creation of *adam* (Gen. 1:26-31).

Then God said, "let **us** make ***adam*** in **our** image, in **our** likeness, and let **them** take responsibility ... (v. 26)

So God created ***adam*** in God's own image, in the image of God s/he created ***adam***; male and female God created **them** ... (v.27)

God blessed **them** ... (v. 28)

God saw all that had been made, and it was **very (exceedingly, excessively) good** ... (v.31)

As we contemplate *adam*, the first thing to note is that before the act of creation God said ; "Let **us** make *adam*," in the plural. The text reveals that the word used for God – *Elohiym*, is a plural noun; and it is used with a plural verb "let us make", and a plural suffix "in our image, in our likeness." Already the Godhead is a "We", not an "I", prefiguring the essential internal unity and community of God – later interpreted as one God, three persons.

Once we grasp this, it should come as no surprise that '*adam*' as used in this text means 'humankind', and is not used as the proper name of an individual. Thus, it ought also not to surprise us that the text then goes on to say "in the image of

God ... God created **them**" and that "God blessed **them**." Adam is not an "I" or a "Me", but an "Us" and a "We"! Our primary identity is therefore community.

He or She?

What is even more provoking is whether God is exclusively a 'he' or a 'she'? The text says, "God created humankind in God's own image ... **male and female** God created them". A legitimate question therefore arises whether both male and female were the original image of God? Does this mean that God is both 'Father and Mother'? I will leave that for you to ponder further, though I will come back to it; but what I will say, is that it can be very important for our understanding of identity and purpose. Whatever may be your insight, one thing however should be beyond dispute, *adam* was God's exceedingly good creation.

Of the Earth

In the second narrative about creation (there are two accounts in Genesis, the first in chapter 1 and the second in chapter 2), the creation of *adam* is described as follows:

The Lord God formed *adam* from the **dust of the earth** and **breathed** into his nostrils the **breath of life**, and *adam* became a **living being**.
(Gen 2:7)

Several things about this text help us in our quest to understand our identity. First, the Hebrew word for earth is *adama*. God creates *adam* from the dust of the earth. Humankind thus has an obvious connection with the earth. We are profoundly of it. The earth is a realm where plants grow and yield fruit that nourish and sustain a multitude of living creatures. The earth gives birth to and sustains new life, in all of its wondrous variety. Little wonder that the ancients worshiped it as 'Mother Earth'. *Adam's* kinship with earth points in part to our identity and from there to our potential and responsibility. Not only are we created to be **life givers**, mother to all creation; but we are created also to be **care givers**, nurturing and safe-guarding all life.

Paradoxical Potential

The earth is also the source of abundance. It is easy to count the number of seeds in an orange or a mango, but can you count the oranges or mangoes in a single seed? In this metaphor is a revelation about our identity. *Adam*, as ‘seed’ of all humankind, is created with unlimited potential! But we must also not forget that we are ‘dust of the earth’. Our mortal bodies have come from it and they will return to it. Without the gift of life, we would be nothing more than ‘dust of the earth’; and ‘dust’ is not life giving. Like any wind instrument, the flute only makes a sound when breath is blown into it. Ours is the paradox of an unlimited potential, arising out of dependency; the dependency on Life, over which we have little real power or control. In this is the insight of humility.

The Breath of God

In Genesis chapter 1, verse 2, we are told that at the very beginning of creation, “the Spirit of God hovered over the waters”. The Hebrew word for Spirit is *ruha* – which also means wind or breath or life of God. This *ruha* is the life giving, creative agency of God that God uses to create the world. So, in Genesis chapter 2 when we are told that God “breathed ... the breath of life” into *adam*, the assumption is that it was the very breath (*ruha*) of God, the life of God! Though not God, we are the “image and likeness” of God, animated by God’s own life giving breath. Thus, “*adam* became a living being”. The Hebrew word translated as “being” is ‘*nepes*’, which means ‘that which breathes’. What makes us living beings – alive, is the breath of God breathing in us; no, breathing us! *Adam* became ‘*nepes*’ because the breath of God breathes within them. We too, like all of humankind, can better understand our identity and purpose when we recognize that we are living, breathing beings brought into life and sustained by the breath of God. Can we live without breath? Can we live without God? Can we find our way to God through breath?

Who Governs?

Contemplating *adam* can lead us into an even deeper understanding of what it means to be human, and into our exploration of identity and purpose. In Hebrew,

the word for *adam* is made up of three letters: *aleph* (a); followed by *dalet* (d) and *mem* (m), the latter two which together spell the word '*dam*'. *Dam* means 'blood' or 'clot'. Symbolically, in Jewish mysticism and esoteric thought, *aleph*, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, signifies the Divine, the First Principle. Thus, '*a + dam*', signifies the union of the spiritual life giving First Principle with that which in turn symbolizes the essence of what represents and sustains mortal life – blood.

But what is the right relationship in this union of heaven and earth? The letter *aleph* is also a word that signifies to teach or inculcate. It therefore indicates leadership and influence. Hence, the related word *aluf*, which refers to a tribal leader or head. Blood, then as now, signifies impulsiveness and passion, uncontrollable urge and desire, irrationality and anger (as in "the blood rushed to his/her head"). Contemplating *adam* thus points to two most significant insights. First, the ontological union between the Breath of God (Spirit) and all the mortal aspects of humanity (matter). Second, the right order of this relationship, in which Spirit is to lead, guide and govern matter. Not surprisingly therefore, *adam* is related to the Hebrew word *adameh*, which means "I will liken myself after" – that is, in the context of an exploration of identity and purpose, I am and I will become the image and likeness of God by following the lead of God! ("Thy will be done").

So much revealed in a letter, a word, an association of words! Who am I? who are we? what is my purpose? what is our purpose? To fulfill our truest destinies and not succumb simply to our fates, the '*dam*' must be subject to the '*aleph*' that precedes it in '*adam*'. Then we fulfill ourselves, our identity and purpose, as God's exceedingly good creation. That is why we stand upright, feet solidly planted on the earth, breathing, with our heads reaching up into the heavens. This is what it means to be '*adam*'. There is more, but that is for later.

ENGAGING THE IMAGINAL

Let us continue our exploration by engaging the imaginal – a world that is real; an interface between the material and the purely transcendent. Here let us use our imaginations and soar above and beyond the limitations of the tangible and

rational, and touch a place of knowing that is more intuitive. Relax and allow yourself to be led, not unlike Alice in Wonderland, ‘down the rabbit hole’. Let us together explore identity and purpose using seven imaginative metaphors: El Tucuche; Maracas/Mayaro; Hot Sun; Marigolds; Keskidees; Abraham/Sarah and Yeshua bar adam bar Yahweh.

EL TUCUCHE

El Tucuche is our symbol for ‘mountain’. We must contemplate deeply what it means to be ‘mountain’. We must become, if we can, ‘mountain’.

Growing up in San Fernando, ‘The Hill’, defined our space. In so far as one can imagine it, it ‘towered’ over us. I grew up in its presence, on the sea coast in the shadow of its north westerly face. Everywhere you went it was there; simply present. Both my primary school (Grant Memorial) and secondary school (Presentation College) were literally in the foothills of the San Fernando Hill. Even now as I return home from work in Port of Spain, the single landmark that tells me I am close to home is The Hill.

Mountains have always inspired me. I often leave home for work in the very early hours of the morning, usually before dawn breaks. As I approach the Caroni River, my gaze often shifts up and ahead to the Northern Range, to El Tucuche, covered in the dew filled haze that gently enfolds the mountains just before dawn, the transient dew that so quickly evaporates in the sun’s warmth of our tropical land. Always I am inspired, even as the sun’s rise lights up the early morning sky and reminds me that a new day is dawning. El Tucuche stands solid, stable, strong, seemingly eternal; rooted in the earth, she has taken hold of me and drawn me into herself. I am also of the earth, rooted. I too stand solid, stable, strong, and eternal. I am a son of *adam* and all that is true of earth is also true of me. I am mountain; we are all mountain.

MARACAS/MAYARO

Maracas and Mayaro are our symbols of ocean. We must contemplate deeply what it means to be ‘ocean’. We must become, if we can, ‘ocean’.

As a boy growing up, I literally lived by the sea. Our home was adjacent to the Gulf of Paria. We swam, fished, boated, explored and played there often. Holidays in the early days were in Mayaro, for weeks on end, unending sun, sand and surf; and later on 'down the islands,' with friends doing all the things that young people do best around the sea. And then, the times in Toco; memories of craggy cliffs and crashing salty seas, of busy crabs and swarming sea gulls. University was in Barbados, and almost every day the warm blue waters of Paradise Beach, which were a jog down the hill from the Cave Hill campus, beckoned. Like the mountain, the ocean has defined me and has taught me much.

The sea, the ocean, the water ... blessed by Spirit at creation, source of life, are an everlasting story of rhythm. Constantly rising and falling tides; unceasing waves that crash upon sandy shores and stony cliffs; unending ripples that bob up and down, dancing to a harmony known only to themselves, all so very alive and so full of life. It is so easy to surrender to the rhythm of the ocean, to be buoyed up by its loving embrace. Becoming one with the ocean, we discover our own deepest rhythms. The rhythms of breath and breathing; of blood flow and heart beat; of waking up and going to sleep; of birth and death, all interconnected, all interdependent, all part of one living organism, all a part of the unending (eternal) rhythm of Life.

To contemplate ocean, is to become the wave that rears its proud head of white foam, grasping at the air above and dancing in the wind that drives it forward willfully to its destiny upon some distant shore. And there, to crash, in momentary triumph of crescendo; and then in quiet acceptance to return, to return from the depths from where it first emerged, knowing it has served its course. Each wave is the ocean, seemingly different, but in truth 'in-formed' by it! All is One.

To contemplate the ocean, is to know that life is always moving, never still; always changing, never fixed; life emerging out of Source, summoned forth in different forms; life from Source and source of life – all is one and One is all; and then returning, back again, to rest awhile in depths unknown, waiting, waiting for another call. I am also of the ocean, always moving, never still; always changing, never fixed; life emerging out of Source; life from source and source of life,

summoned forth in different forms – all is one and One is all; and then returning, back again, to rest awhile in depths unknown, waiting, always waiting, for another call. I am ocean; we are all ocean.

HOT SUN

Earth, water, sun ... 'hot sun', burning on our backs as we ploughed land and cut cane, as we dug pitch and filled buckets. Earth, water, sun ... 'hot sun', as we played and frolicked, on the fields and in the seas. What is this that rises as the giver of life, and sets that we may have rest? What is this that we so curse and fear, yet also that we so gloriously celebrate and worship?

To contemplate sun is to touch its transcendence ... always out of reach, always mystery, always distant. Yet, to contemplate sun is also to touch its immanence ... so involved and intrinsic to our very existence and to our well being, so essential for life. Yes, its searing heat can destroy; but its gentle warmth can germinate and nourish, can heal and restore; and its light shines that we may all see, and in seeing know.

We must contemplate deeply what it means to be 'sun'. We must become, if we can, 'sun'. To be sun is to be both giver of life, sustainer of life; and yet also taker of life. It is to know the transcendent and the immanent; that which is beyond us, yet also so close to us; seen, yet unseen; known, yet unknown; touched, yet untouched; love, yet unloved. To be the sun, is to shine equally on all that choose to enter into our presence, and to share equitably our light and warmth, our life and love. Am I sun? Are we all sun? And if we are sun, how so?

MARIGOLDS

Marigolds are our symbol of flower. We must contemplate deeply what it means to be 'flower'. We must become, if we can, 'flower'. **"A single flower blooms, fields of flowers blossom."**

As a young child growing up, our garden was filled with marigolds. I hope you know the ones I am speaking about, those golden-yellow flowers that grow with such wild abandon. You know the ones that butterflies play and feed upon. That

was the cause of my first interest in marigolds, the butterflies. As little boys we would run around with homemade nets, sewn together from bits of mosquito nets, minds set to catch them, these elusive butterflies. Practically we needed the marigolds. So I would often crumble the dry flowers, and scatter the dark brown needle like seeds, to ensure a continuous supply of marigolds and hence of butterflies. But life can be magnificently mysterious. Those marigolds have taught me quite a lot; as indeed have butterflies.

Marigolds grow together in happy community. Fed by water, rooted in the earth, marigolds turn always towards the sun, as if in adoration and in gratitude. A single flower blooms, fields of flowers blossom! The marigold seeks nothing but to live, and to give, freely to all who may seek of their bounty. This the butterflies know only too well! They are things of beauty to behold, radiant and subtly fragrant; yet so fragile. Yes they bend willingly to a passing breeze, but may so easily break if caressed too hard. And their lives are so short! Here for a while ... then gone, scattered by the wind. But the community lives on; the seeds of one generation sown so that another may arise, to live, to give, to serve, and then to die – and so it goes, on and on and on.

To be a marigold is to know the impermanence of life, its uncertainty, its fragility. Yet is also to trust, that all will be well; from generation to generation, the earth, the water, the sun will provide, as they have always, and all will be well. To be a marigold is come to understand time a little better. For what is time? And what is its purpose? To be a marigold, is to understand that time is for blooming wherever you are planted, nothing more and nothing less. To contemplate the marigold is thus to learn about humility, and, also about generosity. The marigold is born, it flowers, and it dies; it does not ask wither or why, it simply is who it is; it understands deeply that “love itself is its own reward” (St. Bernard).²

But the marigold has another secret to reveal to those who choose to see; a secret hidden deep within itself. For in the marigold I saw the mountain, the ocean and the sun ... earth, water, light; all present; giving life, new life; so fully,

² Life and therefore time, are both precious and fleeting. They are both to be treasured and valued; and thus to be used purposively and meaningfully.

so generously, so selflessly – giving what it had received, and in return flourishing! We too, like the marigold, must ‘bloom where we are planted’ (St. Francis de Sales). In this is our identity and purpose. Can I be a marigold? Can we all be marigolds?

KESKIDEES

Always I have lived surrounded by trees. Our home is surrounded by trees. Keskidees love urban trees. At first they were a nuisance, screeching in the early morning, at such ‘ungodly’ hours. But then one day it dawned on me, the truth that they were revealing. Their shrill voices beckoning the emerging day and calling out to each other, nay, to all creation – “keskidee, keskidee”, “rise up, rise up”, a new day dawns. What is this, this early morning cry? And then I understood! Played out before me, at that most sacred hour – the break of dawn, was the truth about all life, not least of which my own. This was ‘call and response’, enacted for my enlightenment. If only I could have heard and understood earlier! So much sorrow, so much suffering, now seemingly all in vain; identity and purpose unveiled! All of life and all of living is but ‘call and response’, and the only question is what call are we hearing, and how are we responding!

If you but listen carefully, with open heart and open mind, you too can hear the keskidee. One bird cries “keskidee, keskidee”, then a pause, and from afar another replies, “keskidee, keskidee”; and so it goes, on and on and on. Is this not the call of love, seeking only a response? And is not the response always forthcoming, even if we must but wait awhile? Is this not the call of two or three or many, who know themselves to be but one? “Lord I love you”; “And I you”, responds the Lord. “Peace be with you”, says the Lord; “And also with you”, we respond. Is this not the call and response of persons to each other seen and known as such; as persons and not as objects? And is not this call and response common to all religions? And so because it reveals a truth, a truth known to all religious people, the truth of ‘call and response’; the truth of reality as inherently and intrinsically relational: “Asalaamu alaykum” (peace be upon you); “wa alaykum salaam” (and upon you be peace, as well); “Om Shanti (God’s peace, be with you); “Shanti Om” (the peace of God, be with you also).

What revelation is this? What truth revealed by the little keskidees? We are not alone. We are community. And as community there is only always 'call and response', and in its fulfillment we find ourselves and in doing so our purpose. What after all is vocation? From the Latin '*vocare*', 'to summons or call forth' and '*vocatio*', 'a calling'; vocation, or purpose if you prefer, is nothing more than our response to a call, ultimately, to the calling forth of God!

To be keskidee is to know the truth of community – "that they may all be one" (Jn. 17:22). To be keskidee is to always be crying out 'keskidee, keskidee', and to know that your call will always be answered, 'keskidee, keskidee'. To be keskidee is always to be listening, to hear the cry 'keskidee, keskidee', and to respond in kind, to the specific call you hear. 'Keskidee, keskidee'; 'keskidee, keskidee', voices in relationship; persons, calling; waiting for response; persons listening; willing to respond. 'Keskidee, keskidee'; 'keskidee, keskidee', there is no monotony, only revelation of accuracy, the accuracy of timely and appropriate response; the revelation of total presentness to the other, who is in truth not other, but only 'brother'. A revelation that "all real living is meeting" (Martin Buber) and that if we can but "meet the world with the fullness of our being we will meet God" (Martin Buber). Why? Because in this kind of meeting with the other Truth becomes apparent, and in its revelation our response appropriate. Can I live like the keskidees? Can we?

ABRAHAM/SARAH

Who is Abraham? Who is Sarah? We are all familiar with these two Biblical figures. We know their stories well, but do we really know what they reveal? The usual title given to chapter 12 of the book of Genesis, where they first appear, is: 'The Call of Abraham'. Regrettably that is somewhat misleading. It should read: 'The call of Abraham and Sarah', as I hope we will soon see. But first let us journey a while as we are accustomed, only bearing in mind this question – where is Sarah?

From Abram to Abraham

God's call we know was to Abram (not Abraham!) to leave his land and his people and to go to a new land that God would reveal to him (Gen 12:1). Why? He was to be blessed, and to build a great nation, and to be a blessing to all (Gen. 12:2 -3). Indeed, the text tells us that God said: "Go ... and be a blessing ... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you". Abrams openness to listen, ability to hear and willingness to respond to this call (and thus to accept his vocation, purpose and mission), changed who he was – his identity. This change and revelation of new identity is symbolized by God giving Abram a new name. No longer was he to be known as Abram, he was now to be called Abraham! (Gen. 12:5) What was the significance? Abram meant 'exalted father'; but Abraham means 'father of many'.

Contemplating Abram to Abraham, reveals that our truest identity lies in the heart of God, in who we are in God, and is revealed to us only by God. What is also revealed is that our identity exists, if we can imagine it, in the 'form' of a 'mystical name' (conceived at the time of conception – Ps. 139:13), which contains within it the seed (the blueprint) of our purpose.³ Thus, Father Abraham stands as a symbol of the unity of identity and purpose that is the consequence of responding to the call of God. This unity and integrity of identity and purpose is a most significant insight for us today.

However, contemplating Abraham reveals much more about identity and purpose.

Be a blessing to all

First, it reveals what we may term the 'universal mission': which is to **be a blessing to all, so that all may be blessed**. To be made in the image and likeness of God (to be sons and daughters of the Divine), 'in-formed' by the '*ruha*' (Spirit/Breath) of God, God's good creation – is to be blessed, and in that blessed goodness, we are called to be a blessing to all humanity and all creation. This is our primary or core identity and purpose. As sons and daughters of God, as *adam*,

³ Jesus' name 'Yeshua', means 'Yahweh saves' and thus bears within it the blueprint for both his core identity and purpose. This relationship between name and identity and purpose is evident throughout the Bible.

we are good, we are blessed, and we are called to bless all that we come into relationship with throughout our lives.

Meet the world with fullness of heart

Second, it reveals that in generosity of giving we find ourselves, each other and our God. We have already noted that “all real living is meeting” (Martin Buber) and that if we can but “meet the world with the fullness of our being we will meet God” (Martin Buber). Near the great trees of Mamre, Abraham, while sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat, looked up and saw three strangers standing nearby. In a risky act of generosity (because strangers can be dangerous), Abraham offers these strangers water to wash and refresh themselves and something to eat (Gen 18). It turns out that Abraham encounters God as one of the strangers! At that meeting, God discloses to Abraham that he and Sarah would have a child, and responds to Abraham’s disbelief by saying “nothing is too hard for the Lord.” (Gen 18:14) As we know, Sarah was at the time well past the age of child bearing and she and Abraham were still childless (the text tells us that Sarah was 90 years and Abraham 100 years old – Gen. 17:17). In selfless unsolicited generosity we encounter Grace and receive a blessing. Generosity freely given, returns in kind and often beyond our wildest expectations. Indeed, what is revealed is a principle at work: in giving we receive; and when we give with generosity and out of selfless love, what we receive is way beyond what we give. Who am I? What is my purpose? In being a blessing to all, in meeting the world with the fullness of our hearts, with generosity; we somehow find ourselves and discover that we are also blessed beyond measure and in abundance.

Death before resurrection

Third, it also reveals that when we completely abandon ourselves and surrender all of our ‘small’ identifications totally to the One who is beyond self, we discover the depth and breadth of whom we are and who this One is. This total abandonment and surrender in unlimited trust to Unconditional Presence, requires letting go of all the ‘little’ identities we have created and all the many things we so love, possess and identify with. Not just material things, but also

people, feelings, status, power, control, ideas, ideologies, points of view and yes, even cherished beliefs.

This **letting go** is often experienced as a series of ‘little deaths’ and some really big ones also. They are the ‘sacrifices’ we willingly offer on the altar of our life. In this we come, most usually painfully at first, to an understanding of identity that recognizes that all things come from, belong to and will return to God. It is at first a struggle with resignation and even cynicism, that then eventually gives birth to realization, acceptance and hope. Its final fruit is faith; pure and unconditional faith.

As such, throughout our quest for meaning and understanding, for self discovery and for purpose, we cling only to this One in sheer faith. Then, just at the point of seeming annihilation, something happens. An intervention of Grace occurs. We see something never seen before. We come to a knowing beyond knowledge, an understanding beyond reason. We find ourselves in a new way. We discover a new life worth living: a new identity and a new purpose. And then to realize it was always who we really were but never knew before. We discover that each one of us and all of us and all creation, indeed the entire cosmos, are all the dwelling place of the Infinite and Eternal Steadfast Presence of the Holy One – Who Is, Infinite and Eternal Goodness and Compassion (Love). “In God we live and move and have our very existence” (Acts 17:28).

Yahweh Provides

Abraham and Sarah; yes, and Sarah, respond in faith to God’s call to sacrifice their son Isaac. Isaac was God’s gift to them, promised at Mamre in response to their generosity towards God appearing before them as a stranger. They knew that Isaac came from God, belonged to God, and would return to God. They had an absolute trust in God. In faith they could surrender that which they loved and treasured much, but not more than their faith in God. Contemplating Abraham and Sarah reveals that in our willingness to give all to the One from whom all things come; God gives back to us even more. The text tells us (Gen. 22:8, 14), that at the point of no return the angel of the Lord told Abraham: “Because you have not withheld your son, your only son, I will bless you, and your descendants

will be as numerous as the stars in the sky, and the sand on the sea shores, and they too will be blessed”. For Abraham and Sarah, the central insight, repeated in the text for emphasis (Gen. 22: 8, 14), is: **“God himself will provide.”** This knowing, and that is what it is – a knowing, that to live in right relationship with God is to live in a relationship with the One for whom “nothing is too hard” and who will always provide what we need, is a key insight into who we are and how we can do the work we are called to do. So important is this revelation that even the identity of the mountain on which it occurred changed. Thereafter it was known as **‘YHWH Ra’ah’** – ‘Yahweh (God) Shows Himself’ and **‘Yahweh Provides’**. Not only does God contain our truest identity; God also knows and reveals our mission and God provides fully for it!

One person’s, one couple’s act of faith, becomes a blessing for a multitude. This is who we are called to be, Abraham and Sarah. They both emptied themselves of all, and were filled, and their cup runneth over (Ps. 23). Many, including strangers, including us, would drink from that cup and be refreshed. And it all started with a call and response, with an act of unnecessary generosity, and a willingness to trust in the Lord of Life, the One Who Provides.

True Sight

Contemplating Abraham reveals so much, but time only permits two more explorations. Abraham was sent to the mountains of Moriah (Gen. 22:2) to sacrifice Isaac. Moriah means “seeing”, and it is in the land and on the mountains of ‘Seeing’ where Abraham and Sarah emptied themselves of all that they were attached to, in faith, that Abraham and Sarah receive true sight – God will provide! **If your response is to the call of the Divine, then whatever your purpose, your mission, your vocation, God will provide.** To see clearly, to hear correctly, we must empty ourselves of all of our assumed identities. To become *‘imago Dei’* and to manifest *‘missio Dei’*, we must completely and totally abandon ourselves to the One Who Reveals and to the One Who Provides; indeed, to the One Who Sees (‘YHWH Ra’ah’).

Sarai to Sarah

Finally, one cannot contemplate Abraham and not contemplate Sarah. The text does not separate the two. Most significantly, the text traces their lives as intertwined and their unfoldings as paralleled. Thus, we meet Abram in Genesis chapter 11, verse 26 and Sarai right after in verse 29. They journey together, from Haran, to Canaan, to Egypt and back to Canaan, where they settled “near the great trees of Mamre” (Gen. 13:18). No doubt Sarah joined in the acts of generosity towards the three strangers; after all she was the one sitting in the tent looking on, who would have brought water and prepared the meal for them. They were together as Abram and Sarai, through the episode with Hagar and Ishmael, and they are together when both their names (identities) are changed by God: Abram to Abraham (Gen. 17:5) and Sarai to Sarah (Gen. 17:15). Indeed, the text reveals that they both received God’s identical blessing of the promise of a son, and the promise that he (Abraham) would become the Father and she (Sarah) the Mother of many descendants and of great nations (their purpose). Finally, they were together when Abraham and Isaac set off on the sacrificial journey of fate to Mount ‘YHWH Ra’ah’; a fate which, through faith, was to become their destiny.

To contemplate Abraham is to see as God sees, and therefore to see Sarai change to Sarah in faithful response to God’s call. It is therefore to see all women of faith and of courage, who know, love and serve God. It is to see, that no man or woman is called by God to act alone in response to God’s call, but always in community; beginning with that first and most basic community – the family. To contemplate Abraham and Sarah is to see and to understand the value and role of family and of community in the discovery of identity and the fulfillment of purpose.

JESUS

For thousands of years we have asked of Jesus: who are you? What is your work? These are questions of identity and purpose. Indeed, Jesus himself, sensing these questions burning in the hearts of his disciples, asks them: “Who do you say that I am?” However, the mystery of the revelation, of the truth, of Jesus, is not just a

disclosure about him; it is also a revelation, a disclosure, about us. Jesus also asks of us: Who are you? What is your work? Contemplating Jesus reveals to us the Truth about both who God is and who we are. Contemplating Jesus is thus like looking in to a mirror, one that reveals accurately the Truth about our identity and purpose. Jesus is us: we are made in his image and likeness. Or put another way, we are called to be like Jesus – ‘love as I have loved you’ (Jn. 13:34).

Right Seeing: the Cross as Bridge

To contemplate Jesus is to ‘see’ that he is the bridge between heaven and earth. To grasp that he is both son of God and son of man, is to ‘see’ that every time Jesus prays “Abba”, heaven and earth are united. God and humankind (God and creation) become one. This insight is also important for our exploration of identity and purpose. To contemplate Jesus, is to understand that we too are sons and daughters of *adam* and therefore of Yahweh. That the Spirit of God vivifies us. That we are God’s good and blessed creation. That when we truly ‘stand upright’ and breathe – ‘ab-ba’, we create a bridge between Heaven and earth. Indeed, that we are created to be ‘bridges’. Thus, when we too pray “Abba”, with sincerity and in faith, like Jesus taught us to (Mt. 6:9 – 15), we bridge the gap between heaven and earth. To contemplate Jesus, Jesus on the cross, is to ‘see’, to recognize, that most poignant symbol of ‘bridge’. The vertical axis, foot of the cross planted firmly in the earth, its top pointing to heaven, connects the two. The horizontal axis, reaches out uninhibited to all sides, embracing the whole world. The two meet and intersect in the centre, the heart center, center of love and compassion.

Jesus crucified is the symbol of his teaching of the two greatest purposes that all humans are called to incorporate into their living: Love God; love all others as oneself (Mt. 22: 36-40). How is this possible? Rooted on earth, connected to Heaven (love of God), we can from our heart center (center of love) reach out in loving embrace to all others and all creation (love all others as oneself). Jesus on the cross reminds us that there is no containment of the love that fills our heart center when we are connected in cruciform. The spear thrust into Jesus’ heart ensures that this love can never be contained, but flows out for all who would

receive it. Hence the hymn in Philippians: “He emptied himself” (Phil. 2: 5 - 11) for our sake. When we connect to God, we too will find our hearts full of love, pierced by the spear of compassion, and then poured out for all.

Is this too much to bear? To understand what it truly means to be sons and daughters of the Most High? Can we like Abraham and Sarah, dwell in the land of Moriah, the place of ‘seeing’? Can we stand on “YHWH Ra’ah”, that place of true sight ... and see as God sees? Can we be crucified, and become ‘bridges’ between heaven and earth; ones who can connect the entire world in their loving embrace? Or, is this too much for us to bear? Can we live and come into relationship with all creation, moment to moment, out of the ‘form’ of the cross? Can ‘cruci-form’ be our model for living and our way of life? (Jn. 14: 6)

Who am I? What is my purpose? Do we have the courage to become fully human – to be fully alive, to be the Glory of God? (“The Glory of God is the human fully alive “– Irenaeus of Lyons) Can we dwell in God, as God dwells in us? (“Abide in me, as I abide in you” – Jn. 14:4) Can we become a bridge? And not just a bridge between heaven and earth, but a cross that unites the two in our hearts, so that heaven may overflow through us, arms outstretched, to all creation? The human heart, like Jesus’, was made for love! Can we truly love?

Fate or destiny: Choosing the Power of Grace

To contemplate Jesus, is to recognize the reality and power of Grace. We are the beneficiaries of an Amazing Grace. In spite of all that we have been and all that we are, Jesus so loves us that that he incarnates (the Word made flesh – Jn. 1:14) solely for our sakes, so that we might know the truth and know the way to abundant and eternal life (Jn. 14:6; Jn. 10:10). This insight into Grace can be significant for our exploration of identity and purpose. It is what distinguishes destiny and fate.

The natural law is well stated by Isaac Newton: “For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction”. In the Biblical tradition this is expressed as: “what you sow, you will reap” (Job 4:8; Gal. 6:7-8); and “an eye for an eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot” (Ex. 21:24; Deut. 19:21; Lev. 24:20; Mt. 5:38).

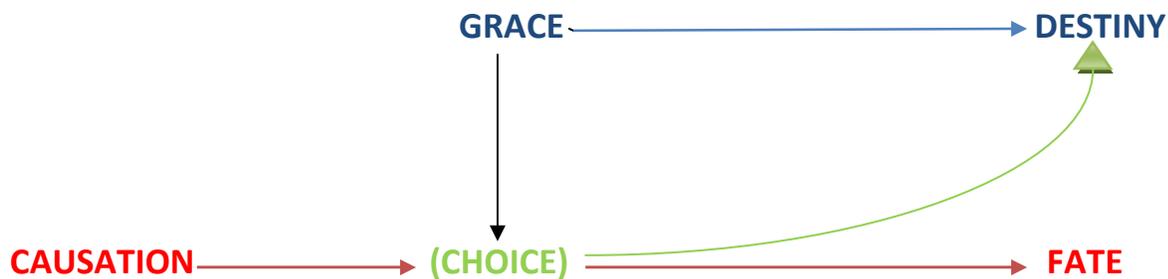
We often hear about it spoken of loosely in Trinidad and Tobago as ‘karma’ or ‘fate’: in the sense that our actions are causative, and bring about predictable and proportionate reactions (in our own lives). “New agers” say, ‘you receive exactly what you give”, and have constructed an entire science for success and happiness based on a so called ‘law of attraction’, which is based on pure causation. All of which is true, if only partially so. It is indisputably true that every choice we make has consequences. But it is also true that the consequences of these ‘first’ choices are affected by all other choices that we may make. Consequences of ‘first’ choices are thus not necessarily inevitable, in the sense of a fixed and certain outcome; because of the influence that subsequent choices may have on them. But there is more.

To contemplate Jesus, is to recognize his salvific intervention as pure gift – the Grace of God freely given for the benefit of all humankind and all creation. To contemplate Jesus, is to see in the two criminals who hung at his sides on the cross, the power of choice and of Grace; and the distinction between destiny and fate. (Lk. 23:32, 39 -43) Both criminals are presented as equals. Both deserve to be crucified, a fate no doubt causally linked to their conduct. They were justly deserving of the same fate. Yet, that did not happen. Why not? One turns (an indication of choice) to Jesus and seeks his mercy, love and forgiveness (“Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom”). This one recognizes Jesus for who he is. Grace responds: “Truly I tell you, this day you will be with me in Paradise”.

And notice also that Jesus critiques the ‘eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth’ purely natural theory of causation, and invites us into a different possibility, a way of living that accords with our true nature, our divine nature (Mt.5: 38 – 48): “But I say to you, Do not resist ... turn the other cheek ... give your coat as well ... go also the second mile ... love your enemy ... pray for those who persecute you”. What madness is this! Why should we respond in this way? Jesus answers: “so that you may be children of your father in heaven; for he makes his sun to shine ... and sends his rain to fall (on all)”. The way of God is the way of Grace. It is the Way of Love: “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things” – 1 Cor. 13:7. And we are the children of God! The choice to seek Grace

changes fate and embraces destiny! Fate says $1 + 1 = 2$. Destiny knows that $1 + 1 + \text{Grace} = \text{Unlimited Possibility}$ - "nothing is impossible with God" (Lk. 1:37) and "nothing is too hard for the Lord" (Gen. 18:14).

Sarah's and Abraham's fate was to be childless. But their destiny was to be the father and mother of multitudes and of great nations; to be blessed and a blessing to many. God's intervention changed their fate and created their destiny. But they had to choose to open and to receive the gift of God's Grace. Fate is the flat line of causation, even as it is continuously influenced by ongoing choices. It will prove true if we choose to live outside of Grace. Destiny is the child of Grace. It is the experiential flourishing of All Possibility; the expression of Abundance; the promise of Blessing.



We choose our identity and our purpose in either the acceptance of the natural law or the choice of a Grace 'in-formed' and 'in-spired' life! It is the choice between fate and destiny. But the choice is always ours to make. To contemplate Jesus is to recognize him always present waiting for our call, waiting to respond and to transform our circumstances, so that we might fulfill our destinies – which are only God's will, God's desire for us to be fulfilled. To contemplate Jesus is to see him asleep in the boat while the storms rage around us placing us in great danger, waiting patiently and expectantly for us to turn to him and to say – help! Then he will command the seas to calm down, and they will obey his word, and the danger we were in will be averted (Lk. 8:22-25). Our fate may be to perish in heavy, stormy seas; but our destiny may be to survive that momentary

intervention in our lives and become who we were intended (destined) to be. Grace is what makes the difference! Calling on God is the way!

Two Myths: Separation and Scarcity

To contemplate Jesus is to shatter two myths that both define and limit our identity and purpose: the myths of separation and of scarcity. Separation asserts that we are alone – we were born alone, we live alone and we will die alone. Separation asserts that ‘I’ am the center of my own existence; no one looks out for me; every person must ‘row their own boat’. Scarcity asserts that there is not enough to go around. There is a general lack; an inadequacy of resources to satisfy even basic needs – physical, emotional, spiritual. Together separation and scarcity lead rationally to comparison and to competition (because we are separate we compare ourselves to the ‘other’ and we compete because we are separate and there are limited resources); and to greed and hoarding (because there is not enough); and to manipulation, exploitation, oppression, discrimination (because we are separate and there is not enough and we are in competition). The hard truth is that most of us live out of different degrees of acceptance of these myths, and do so in our compartmentalized ways of living. Thus we behave in one way in our family context, and in another in our church context, and in yet another in our school context, and so on, in our community, country, and world contexts.

Contemplating Jesus shatters both of these myths and exposes them for what they ultimately are – lies! Contemplating Jesus invites us to embrace the truth revealed in Jesus and to live out of that truth (“You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free” - Jn. 8:32). Indeed, contemplating Jesus reveals that it is an imperative to shatter these myths if we want to enjoy true freedom, peace and joy (Jn. 14 & 15).

Separation: the ‘Original Sin’

Separation is a lie; unity and community are the truth. To contemplate Jesus is to recognize the Truth of a Triune God whose essential nature is unity in community: “Three persons, distinct but not separate - one God.” Contemplating Jesus brings

us face to face with the revelation that the fundamental unit of reality is ‘Persons-in-Relationship’, in loving relationship! Not just objects co-existing together. To contemplate Jesus is to understand that when *adam* (humanity) was made in God’s image and likeness, autonomous individuals were not created; but persons in relationship, distinct but not separate, were created. Moreover, they were created and lived together in intimate harmonious relationship with their Creator (Gen.2:16, 18; 3: 8-13).

In the first Genesis account of creation, which we have already considered and which is reviewed here to establish a context for our next exploration: God creates *adam*, “in God’s own image, male and female God created them” (Gen. 1:27). And as we have already noted, the image of God is “them” – a unity of community. Thus God says: “Let us make *adam* in our image, in our likeness, and let them have responsibly for the fish ... birds ... all animals ...” (Gen. 1:26). God then blesses this unity of persons, this community – and looking at them, we are told that God “saw all that He had made and it was exceedingly (me’od – much, greatly, exceedingly) good (Gen 1:31). Thus *adam* was God’s exceedingly good creation.

‘Rib’ or ‘Side’?

In the second account of creation we are given details for the first time about the specific creation of ‘man’ and of ‘woman’ as distinct from one another. We are told that *‘issah’* – woman, was created from *‘adam’*. Most translations say that *adam* was caused to be put into a deep sleep, and God took one of *adam’s ‘ribs’* and made woman from that *‘rib’*. This, in my opinion, is a most unfortunate translation that creates a patriarchal agenda, and one that tragically has the effect of perpetuating the false myth of separation and autonomy.

The Hebrew word translated as ‘rib’ is *‘sela’* – and it means ‘side’! Now this changes things quite dramatically. The text can then be rendered as follows: that *adam* (as a living being, *‘nepes’* – ‘male and female’) is put to sleep, and God takes one side of *adam*, and from that side comes - God forms, woman. In my opinion this rendering of the text is more faithful to the language used in the context of what has come before. Indeed, the footnotes to most standard study bibles will

state in relation to Gen 2:21, as an alternative translation of the text – “took part of man’s side”. It is noteworthy that the Hebrew word for woman also sounds like the Hebrew word for man: “*issah*” and “*iys*”. In this understanding of the text, the familiar verses that follow immediately take on a new light:

For this reason a man (*iys*) will leave his father and mother and be united to his woman (*issah*), and they will become one flesh. (Gen. 2:24).

The Hebrew word translated as ‘flesh’ is ‘*basar*’ – and it also means ‘living thing’, ‘humankind’! Hence we see that the second creation account of the creation of man and woman has deep resonances with the first creation account of *adam*. Out of a single ‘*nepes*’ (living being) – *adam*, ‘*iys*’ (man) and ‘*issah*’ (woman) come, two sides of a single living being; and they are then reunited through choice as one ‘*basar*’ (living thing). Note, that in the creation of *adam*, God breathes God’s breath into *adam* to give *adam* life. But in the formation of *issah* this does not occur. Why not? Because, *adam*, from whose side *issah* is formed, is already alive, which reinforces the rendering that I am suggesting here. Also note, that in the second account of creation, the chapter (chapter 2) ends with verse 25 as follows: “The man and the woman were both naked, and they were not embarrassed (or confused or dismayed).” Formed from Adam their nakedness caused no shame because they were of one flesh! One is not embarrassed in the presence of oneself! However, after the temptation in the garden and the eating of the ‘forbidden fruit’, we are told that the man hid from God “because I was naked” (Gen. 3: 10). This ‘new’ awareness of nakedness is symbolic of the belief of separation. Man no longer experiencing himself as one with woman (or with God and creation), but as separate, hides in shame!

This rendering of the Genesis text and the resulting insights may be too much for some; but I suggest that it can have significant implications for the question of identity. From the very beginning humankind was created as ‘unity in community’; and the intention was, and is, that even after apparent separation, symbolically into man and woman –equal sides of *adam*, humankind is called to

live as 'one flesh' – a single living unity, a community in God; One Humanity, One Creation.

One Vine Many Branches

Contemplating Jesus reveals and invites us to reclaim this truth and to live out of it as we come into relationship with all others and all creation moment to moment. Jesus' teaching on the one vine with many branches (Jn.15), and Paul's reiteration using the analogy of one body with many parts (1 Cor. 12:12), point to this 'distinct but not separate' reality that is the ultimate truth underpinning our identity and purpose. There is one creation, one humanity, one cosmos; distinct but not separate; that lives and moves and exists in the One God, Creator, Sustainer, Redeemer (Acts 17:28). Who am I? becomes, who are we? And, what is my work? becomes, what is our work? For, there is no 'I' or 'me'; only 'we' and 'us'!

Jesus did not exist as an individual above or apart from humanity. He dwelled amongst us, like us, with us, for us ... one of us ("... and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, 'God is with us'" – Mt. 1:23). He did not discriminate on the basis of any dividing considerations. All were invited to eat and to drink with him at his table: old, young; men, women; rich, poor; Jew, gentile; sick, healthy; single, married; black, white; believer, non-believer; privileged, marginalized; sinners, saints; harlots, priests ... all without exception were called and loved, forgiven and healed, blessed and sent forth to be a blessing to all – to love God, and love all others and to care for the entire creation. Jesus reveals the myth of separation to be the ultimate lie. Truth is One. We are One. Live as One. All is One.

In this context, and in the context of a contemplative exploration of identity and purpose, how can we continue to compare and compete? How can we alienate, manipulate, exploit and oppress? Indeed, how can we judge and condemn? Would your heart compare and compete with your brain? Would your fingers exploit your toes? Can your heart judge your lips? Only an insane or irrational person would do this - a 'mad-man'.

Scarcity: the Fundamental Deception

Scarcity is a lie; abundance is the truth. To contemplate Jesus is to recognize that life is abundant and God's Grace is excessive and extravagant.

Jesus reveals himself publically for the first time at the wedding at Cana (Jn. 2: 1-11): "He thus revealed his glory, and his disciples put their faith in him" (Jn. 2: 11). The Greek word for revealed (*'phaneroo'*) means 'to reveal, to appear, make known, show, be disclosed'. This is therefore an event of great significance. We all know the story. Jesus and his mother, Mary, were at a wedding in Cana, when the wine that the host was serving ran out. No doubt it was the cause of shame. Mary asks (actually implores) Jesus to 'do something about it' - this embarrassing situation. And he does, though somewhat reluctantly. He turns water into wine.

How Much Can You Drink?

This we all know. But the real revelation is in the details. The text is very specific about a number of details and this is purposeful. First we are told that there were six earthen jars each holding up to 30 gallons of water. A quick calculation reveals that it was 6 multiplied by 30 = 180 gallons of water, which was changed into wine. Now that is a lot of wine! Especially given the fact that the host's supply of wine had already been served and consumed! Let's put this in a contemporary perspective so that its significance may really become apparent to us. A standard bottle of wine contains about 750 mls. One UK gallon is about 4547 mls. That is six bottles of wine. So, 180 gallons, is 180 multiplied by 6, which is 1080 bottles of wine! That's how much wine Jesus provided that day. Any surprise it was remembered? Thank God they did not have breathalyzer tests in those days – and what does that say about Jesus' attitude to alcohol anyway (maybe that is why he was somewhat reluctant!)

But that is not the end of it. The text reveals that Jesus changed the wine into "choice wine" (v. 10) – this was 'Dom Perinon'! Not only was the quantity abundant, but the quality was superlative. The text makes sure that the readers

are left in no doubt that what Jesus did was not about 'sufficiency' or 'enough'; it is all about excessiveness and extravagance. Even wastefully so!

Yet this is exactly what Jesus did all the time and everywhere: he was wastefully extravagant in his love and Grace for all, without any discrimination. His 'miracles' simply demonstrated and revealed this 'for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear'.

For those who appreciate Jewish sacred numerology (which is important to fully appreciate what Jesus reveals and the Bible intends to convey); the fact of 6 earthen water jars is also significant. Seven is the number of perfection. Six falls just short. These six earthen jars symbolize creation and humanity in particular; as being not quite perfect. Despite this reality, Jesus intervenes and using these very 'imperfect vessels' creates something of perfection –plain water is transformed into choice wine! Not only is the myth of scarcity a lie; but **our 'imperfections' are no barrier to God's Grace acting in and through us** to 'perfect' us (make us whole) and use us to serve others ("Be perfect - complete, whole, one - therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" – Mt. 6:48). Moreover, notice the appropriateness and accuracy of response to need. Jesus responded to the specific contextual need of the people gathered at that particular time and place: the wine had run out, and there was need for more wine. **His response was a relevant contextual intervention, appropriate to the urgent and pressing needs of the society.**

Returning to the myth of scarcity. Do you remember the 5 loaves and 2 fish (Jn. 6)? 5000 were fed, and 12 baskets of leftovers collected. $5 + 2 = 7$: and seven ('perfection') symbolizes the potential for unlimited possibilities, and accordingly 5000 are fed. Twelve (12) baskets collected symbolizes the 12 tribes of Judah and therefore that God provides for all of God's people. There is no scarcity or even sufficiency here, this is all about abundance!

Who was Prodigal?

And what about the parable of “the Prodigal Son”? (Lk. 15: 11 – 32). ‘Prodigal’ means extravagant and wasteful. We often think that it describes the young son who claimed from his father and wasted his inheritance on extravagant living. But does it really? Maybe it really describes the love of the father: a prodigal love – extravagant and lavish. First, the father gives his son what he requests without question. Then, upon his return, we find the father looking out for him. Rushing out to meet him. He welcomes his returning destitute son without question or judgment or condemnation. He unhesitatingly and immediately restores his son to his former status, placing his “best robe’ around him, sandals on his feet and a ring on his finger. And he celebrates lavishly and disproportionately; he orders killed and prepared the specially fattened calf (the choicest meat), a feast, music, dancing and drink (the text itself is filled with rich and lavish language). So extravagant is this celebration, that the loyal, faithful, diligent and conscientious elder son becomes jealous and angry, complaining to the father that he was never treated to such a celebration. Grace is overwhelming abundant; so much so, that from a human perspective it is unfair and wasteful.

Abundant Life

Everywhere we turn, Jesus is surrounded by abundance; indeed, he is the fullness of abundance, of abundant life. He heals abundantly and extravagantly and without any discrimination – Jews, Romans, Samaritans, gentiles; men , women, children; slaves, free persons, rich, poor; lepers, liars, harlots. (Lk. 4: 40) He is so lavish with his Grace, that he even raises the dead! He speaks about ‘wedding banquets’ being laid out for all people, irrespective of station in life, or class, or means (Mt. 22). And he accepts being anointed lavishly with “a pound of costly perfume made from pure nard” at a dinner held in his honor (Jn. 12). Such was the extravagance of this anointing, that we are told that “the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume”, valued at “three hundred denarii.” In today’s currency, this would be the equivalent of USD \$6,000.00! No wonder Jesus’ disciples complained about this ‘waste’ and ‘extravagance’. We would also I

believe. Why? Because we believe the myth of scarcity; and disbelieve the truth of abundance. Contemplating Jesus invites us into a radically new way of seeing, and more fundamentally, of experiencing life – the way of abundance; accessed through faith in and a life lived out of an engaged relationship with the Divine.

If this is what is available and is offered freely to us: why worry? What are we so afraid of? This is exactly what contemplating Jesus challenges us to question (Mt. 10: 29 – 31). Why do we hoard? Why are we so selfish? Why are we so possessive? To contemplate Jesus is to understand the principle of abundance. It is to recognize that we are God’s good and blessed creation. It is to see that “God calls” and “God provides”. And that God waits for us to respond. Then, out of our abundance, freely bestowed, we are invited to freely and generously share; and to recognize that in our sharing, we are not sharing with ‘others’, but with ‘ourselves’.

Unity, Abundance and Flourishing

How will we choose to live? What will shape and ‘in-form’ our identity and influence the fulfillment of our purpose?



To contemplate Jesus is to know and to experience the blessing and extravagant abundance of God’s unlimited Grace. It is to know and to experience Divine Love. It is to know the freedom to embrace our destiny, and not remain prisoners of our fate. But why? To what end? For what purpose? We are free to love. And

therefore, free to serve. As St Bernard says: “Love serves.” Three times Peter denied Jesus; three times he sought reconciliation by professing his love for Jesus; each time Jesus points him to service: “Feed my sheep, feed my lambs, feed my sheep” (Jn. 21: 15 -17). To love is to serve! But in addition, to be loved is to be free to flourish: to find ourselves and realize our dreams; to pursue our purpose and actualize our destinies.

We are not separate and there is enough. In fact, we are really One, and there is abundance, perfumed ‘pure nard’ for anointing, so that all may flourish. When we love and serve each other, we love and serve ourselves, and we love and serve our God; and in this there is abundant flourishing for all. Unity, abundance and flourishing, these are the truths that define our reality when we choose to find and pursue our destiny, when we chose to consent to Grace. Let these truths ‘in-form’ our identities and shape our purpose, so that together we may aspire and together we may achieve, as One people under God, God’s people.

Divinization!

To understand who we really are as sons and daughters of *adam* and of YHWH, we must take one final step. To contemplate Jesus is to recognize the truth about who we really are: “Temples of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16). As sons and daughters of *adam*, as men and women, we are a people of God in the profound sense that:

- The very breath (*ruha*) of God animates us and gives us life (Gen. 2:7)
- God dwells in our midst (Ex. 29:46; Lev. 26:11; Ezekiel 37:27)
- The Holy Spirit, God, dwells within us (1 Cor. 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16)

As the Scriptures repeatedly state, God proclaims as Truth and Divine Intent:

“My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they will be my people.” (Ezekiel 37:27)

And, as Jesus has revealed: “The Kingdom of God (the reign and presence of God) is within and among you.” (Lk. 17:21)

To contemplate Jesus is to come to know the truth of the **Divine Indwelling**. God has made their abode, her home, his place of dwelling, the center of each human and all humanity. Hence Jesus pleads: “Abide in me, as I abide in you” (Jn. 15:4); and “believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (Jn. 14: 10 -11); and reveals that he has sent the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth, to be our healer, helper, teacher, guide, comforter, Who will “abide with you, and will be in you” (Jn. 14:17). Thus, Father, Son and Spirit are in us! We are truly Temples of God! The Kingdom of God is within us! We live and move and exist in God!

To be human is to be divine; it is to be Divine by participation. By participation in relationship with Unity-in-Community vivifying us. To contemplate Jesus, is to know, love and consent to the Presence of the Triune God Who dwells within and whose very Presence (whose *ruha* – breath) is our source of life. To contemplate Jesus is to know that this same Presence, which is Life-Itself, dwells within all humanity and all living creatures as their source of life also. To contemplate Jesus is to know and to ‘see’ that this One-Life is ‘my’ life and ‘your’ life – indeed, it is Our Life! There are no divisions, no separations; no man or woman, rich or poor, worthy or unworthy; all are One-in-God. To contemplate Jesus is to come to know that Jesus reveals himself so that we may see who we truly are. This is the Truth, this is the Way and this is Life (Jn. 14:6). This is who we really are, whatever else we may think; and this is what determines our real work, whatever else we may be doing.

‘One as We are One’

To contemplate Jesus is to enter into the profound fullness of his prayer for all humanity and all creation, offered on our behalf to the Father shortly before the end of his mortal existence (Jn. 17:20 -23):

I ask ... on behalf of all who will believe (trust) in me (in who I am, what I reveal and what I do), that they may **all be one**. As you, Father, are in

me and I am in you, may they also **be one in us**; so that the world may believe ... The Glory (the Divine Truth - Light, Life and Love, and Radiance - Manifestation) that you have given me I have given them, so that they may **be one even as we are one**, I in them and you in me, that they may⁴ **become completely one** ...

The Glory of God - God's Intelligence, Wisdom, Presence, Compassion, Truth, Love, Life and Light fills and 'in-forms' us, as the water of the ocean fills and 'in-forms' each and every wave. This is who we are. We are not God; yet we are One with God! We are not God; yet we are 'of God'!

To contemplate Jesus is to come to the understanding and to the recognition, that 'death' is the consequence of separation (beginning with the separation of Adam and Eve, and of both from God); and that 'life' – salvation, lies in (re)unification (persons with persons, persons in community, persons and community with God). Jesus' entire life – birth, incarnation, baptism, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension and all symbolic – paradigmatic enactments of the centrality of unification for effecting redemption. In short, we can never really discover our true identity and purpose, until we recognize and live out of the truth of who we are in God and in each other. In this we rediscover ourselves as being truly Homo Religiosus.

DIVINE QUESTIONS

We began this discourse with some human questions, and we must end it with the same questions, only asked from a different perspective and with a different awareness. **What matters, is less how we live, but more from where do we live and engage each other and all creation.** "Where yuh (are you) coming from?" is a well known local question. It speaks less to 'place' as geography, and more to 'place' as agenda and motive. For our purposes however, it speaks more so to 'place' as 'connection'. The question becomes for us firstly: Out of what 'inner

⁴ Or, "may be made perfect, completely whole, as one".

relationship' and 'inner consciousnesses' are we engaging each other and the world as we come into relationship with them? Is it the relationship with God within? Or is it one of the many other relationships that we engage in within ourselves? Is it out of the consciousness of unity or of separation? Whose voice do we hear within? And also, whose voice do we listen to and follow? And then these questions in turn become: How are our 'outer relationships' and how is our 'outer awareness' engaging us into response? What is our 'response – ability'; our willingness to respond to the need of the other? Can we respond to the call of God in the other? Do we see and respond to the other as One? And finally, these questions all demand of us integration, of who we are (identity) and what we do (purpose).

In terms of identity and purpose, these questions are all critical. This is because, as we have seen, our identity is indivisibly linked to the inner relationship we choose to live out of and how that is in turn influenced by how we perceive and engage our outer reality; and because the 'shape' of our purpose flows out of our identity. Who am I? What is my purpose? Who are we? What is our purpose? These questions can really challenge us, but they can also free us. Free us to be the persons and the communities we were intended to be and to become.

May we all come to know our unity. May we all come to know our blessedness and our goodness. May we all come to know the abundance that is ours to have and to share. May we all come to know our Loving God Who dwells within and among us. May we all come to know and to accept ourselves as the 'Glory of God'. May we all choose to live and engage the world from out of relationship with our God. May we all have the ability to truly hear and respond to the other. May we all come to uncover and to know our true identities. May we all choose to embrace and live out our true purposes. In these are our happiness and our flourishing. In these our service is fulfilled. In these is our love made perfect. **A single flower blooms; fields of flowers flourish.**

BLOOM WHERE YOU ARE PLANTED

**A flower blooms.
Its fragrant perfume fills the air,
a smile appears on a forlorn face.
Its radiant colors glow,
a passer-by stops to look, to see,
a song of praise is uttered.**

**A flower blooms.
It opens to greet the rising sun,
petals turned to face the light's life-giving warmth,
silent awe and gratitude.**

**A flower blooms.
Rooted in the earth,
its thirst is quenched in rainy waters,
its nourishment satiated from rich soil, full of life.**

**A flower blooms.
It pays no rent, It charges no fee,
It does not grasp, It does not hoard,
Freely it has received,
Freely it gives.**

**A flower blooms.
Abiding only in Life, it flourishes.
Love's creation,
A gift to all.**

**A single flower blooms,
Fields of flowers flourish.
A single flower blooms.
And what of you?
And what of us?**

(PJ, Oct. 2011)